



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands

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SELF CARE TOOLKIT FOR FRONTLINERS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT ABAAD

ABAAD is a non-profit, non-political, and non-confessional organization dedicated to promoting women's rights and ending violence against women and girls. Our work extends beyond local communities to regional and international spheres. We combine life-saving services for VAWG survivors with long-term efforts of legal reform, community engagement, and advocacy campaigns that challenge harmful social norms.

By working side by side with survivors, communities, and allies, we strive to elevate the voices of women and build safer, fairer, and more peaceful societies across Lebanon, the MENA region, and beyond.

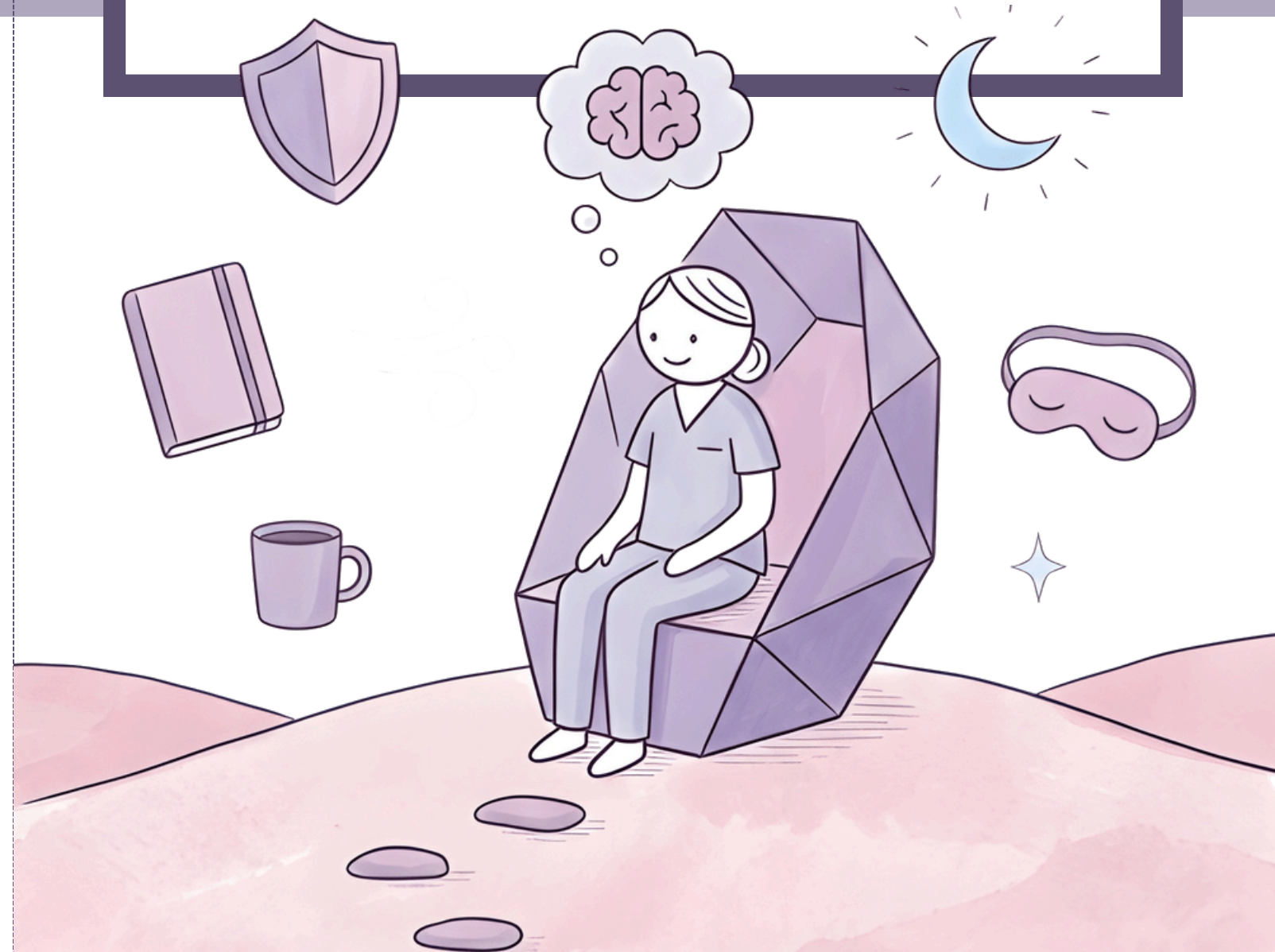


DEFENDDEFENDERS
East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project



ABOUT STRENGTHENING CIVIL COURAGE - SCC

Funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the 'Strengthening Civil Courage' (SCC) alliances formed by ABAAD, Amnesty International Netherlands, DefendDefenders and PAX. Active in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, the alliance is named 'Strengthening Civil Courage' because we regard our support to the resilience of people and the ability of citizens and their communities to realize sustainable change on the ground, as the core of our work. Running from 2021 to 2025, the programme has the following key objectives: protect and strengthen civic space; pursue gender equality; support activists and youth leaders working on peace and human rights; and push for international regulation of external stress factors which facilitate/exacerbate violent conflict.



PURPOSE OF THE TOOLKIT

The Self-Care Toolkit for Front-Liners was developed in direct response to the growing challenges faced by professionals who dedicate their lives to supporting vulnerable communities. Front-line workers operate in environments marked by instability, exposure to traumatic experiences, and continuous demands for emotional and physical resilience.

While their role is central to ensuring the protection and recovery of individuals affected by crisis and violence, the toll on their own well-being often goes unaddressed. Many staff and volunteers experience exhaustion, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout as a result of sustained exposure to stressors. These conditions not only affect their personal health but can also compromise the quality, continuity, and safety of the services they provide. Recognizing this urgent need, the toolkit was created to offer a structured, accessible, and practical set of resources that empower front-liners to take care of themselves as they care for others.

It is built on the understanding that self-care is not an optional luxury, but a professional necessity and an ethical responsibility. A worker who is physically and emotionally resilient is better equipped to remain present, effective, and supportive when engaging with survivors and communities. Moreover, investing in staff wellbeing directly translates into stronger, more sustainable humanitarian and social services. The toolkit introduces key concepts such as self-care, stress management, burnout prevention, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and countertransference, and provides evidence-based practices that can be integrated into daily routines.

It includes exercises and techniques to help individuals regulate stress, build emotional awareness, practice grounding, and develop coping strategies. The sessions are designed to be interactive and reflective, encouraging staff to recognize their own needs, identify early warning signs of exhaustion, and adopt preventive habits before challenges escalate into crises.

By framing self-care as a continuum —covering prevention, management, and recovery—the toolkit meets workers where they are, whether they are beginning to feel fatigued or already struggling with burnout. Beyond individual practices, the toolkit emphasizes the shared responsibility of organizations and teams in creating an enabling environment. Stress and burnout are not solely personal issues but are strongly shaped by working conditions. Therefore, the toolkit highlights strategies at three levels: the individual, the group/managerial, and the organizational.

This approach ensures that while individuals learn how to care for themselves, organizations are reminded of their duty to provide balanced workloads, supervision, supportive policies, and recognition of staff contributions. Ultimately, the Self-Care Toolkit for Front-Liners is both preventive and restorative. It strengthens the resilience of those who stand at the forefront of humanitarian and social response, ensuring that they remain capable of delivering quality, compassionate, and safe support. It also reflects our commitment to safeguarding the wellbeing of employees and volunteers as a cornerstone of effective service provision. By equipping front-liners with these tools, we are not only protecting them from harm but also reinforcing the sustainability and impact of the vital work they perform every day.

SHORT DESCRIPTION

This session focuses on getting to know the participants and to break the ice between them. It will give a brief introduction about the of self-care concept.

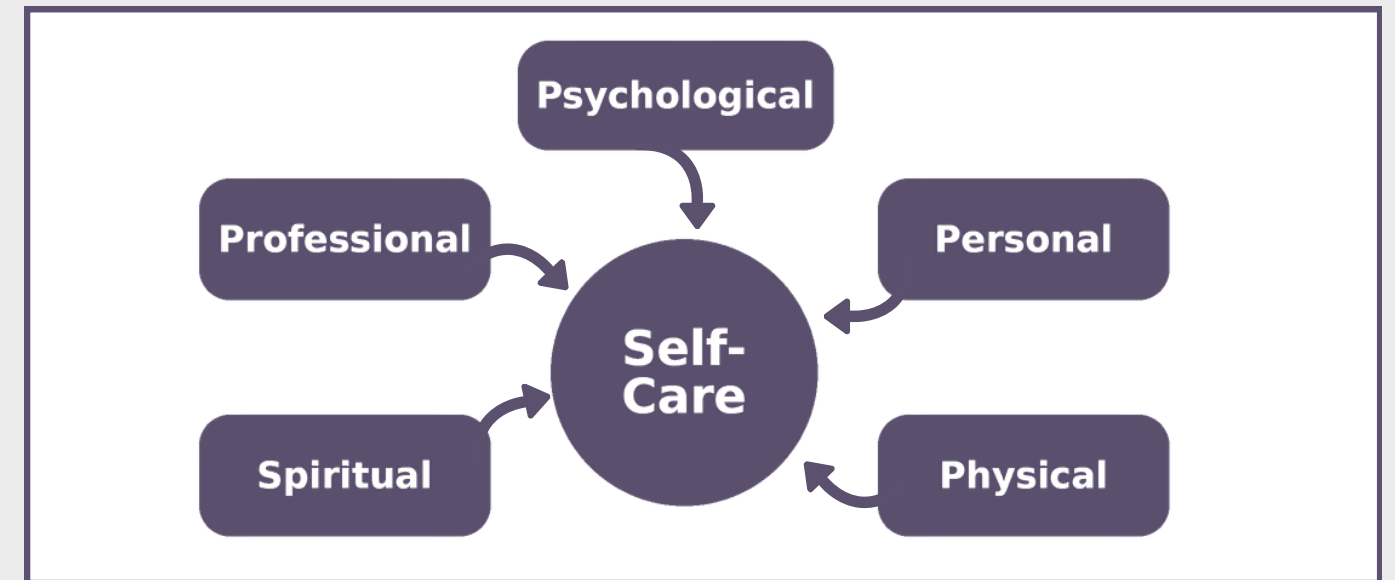
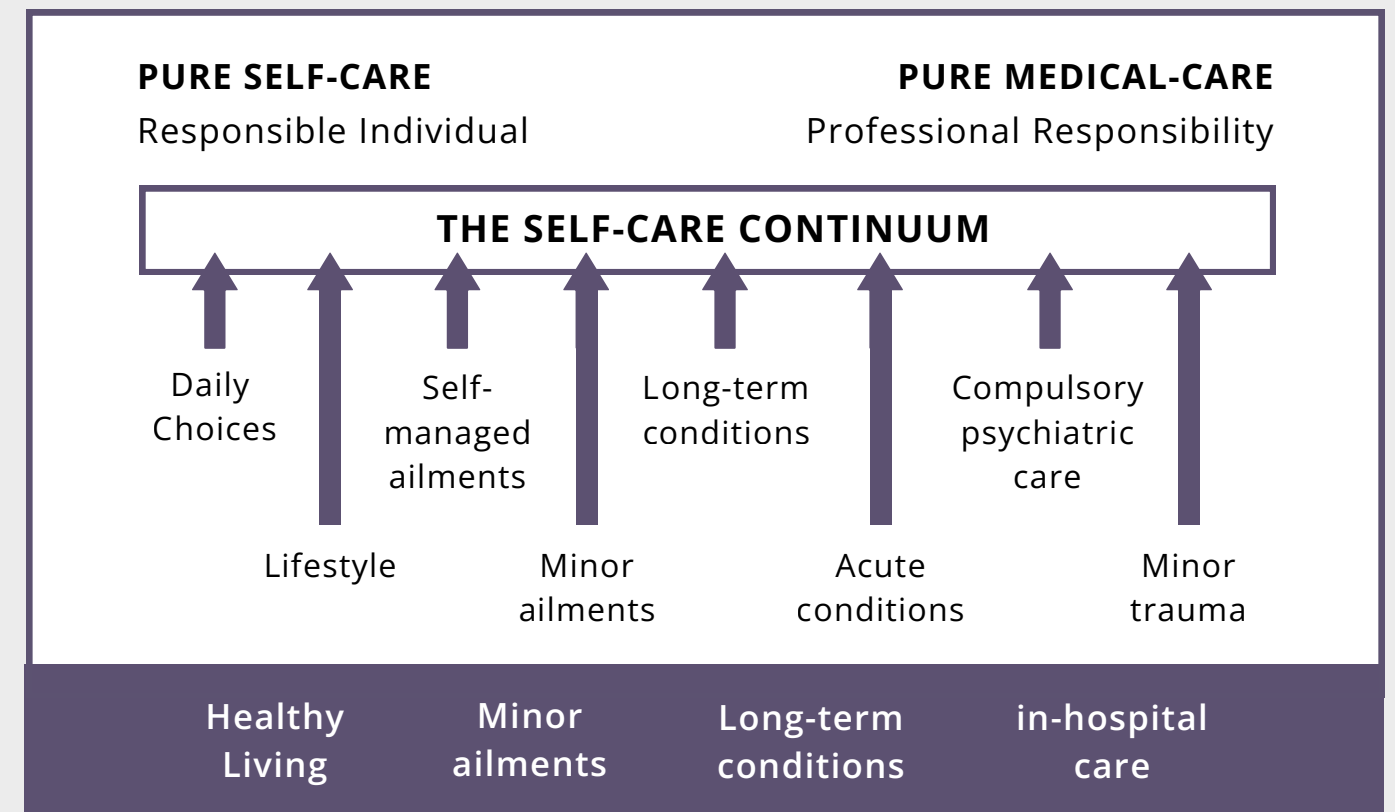
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To enhance participants' knowledge about the self-care concept.
- To give participants a room to express their feelings of exhaustion related to their work.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of self-care has evolved significantly over the past decades and is now understood in a more holistic way. Although definitions may vary, they share several common elements: Self-care can be practiced individually, with or without specialized support.

- Self-care is individually based and is developed according to the person's needs, beliefs, interests, lifestyle, and spirituality.
- Self-Care is NOT: an emergency response plan, activated when stress becomes overwhelming, acting selfishly and thinking that "it's all about me", or adding more tasks to your "to-do" list.
- Self-care includes physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, personal and professional dimensions that help reduce stress and burnout and promoting well-being for both workers and beneficiaries.

**SELF - CARE AS A CONTINUUM OF CARE**

- Self-care can be practiced to prevent the onset and development of a certain health condition such as stress, burnout, or even depression and anxiety.
- Self-care can be practiced to slow down the progression of a certain health condition after the risk factors and/or symptoms have appeared.
- Self-care can be practiced if you have already developed a health condition in order to prevent deterioration and focus on recovery.

Why is self-care for Frontliners is a must?

- Because our mental health matters.
- As front-liners we are subjected to what is known by compassion fatigue.
- To attain positive coping mechanisms to protect ourselves from burnout.
- To do no harm during our support to the survivors.
- Because we are living in non-stable environment (socially, economically, politically...)

FACILITATION OF THE SESSION

Frame

Start by welcoming the participants and introducing yourself. Give a brief introduction about the learning objectives of the session and the different exercises you will facilitate during the session.

Exercise: Welcoming and introducing the participants, 10'

Ask participants to introduce themselves (name, job position, and something they would like to share with the group about themselves).

Exercise: Expectations about the sessions, 10'

Ask participants what they expect from the sessions and provide them with the right objectives.

Exercise: Ground rules, 10'

Ask participants: "What are the ground rules that they expect to be followed by the group to feel comfortable and organized during the upcoming sessions?"

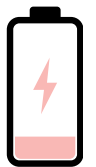
Exercise: A story to tell, 30'

Sam is a new employee. He started a project with a lot of readiness, responsibility, and enthusiasm. He was confident in himself, believed he could achieve everything. He usually was a cheerful mood. He was focused, creative, efficient, took initiatives, saw opportunities everywhere.

After a while, he started to change. He became pessimistic, often late and absent. He felt no sense of purpose. He was constantly tired and felt drained. He was disconnected and disinterested.

What has happened to him? Why did he change so much?

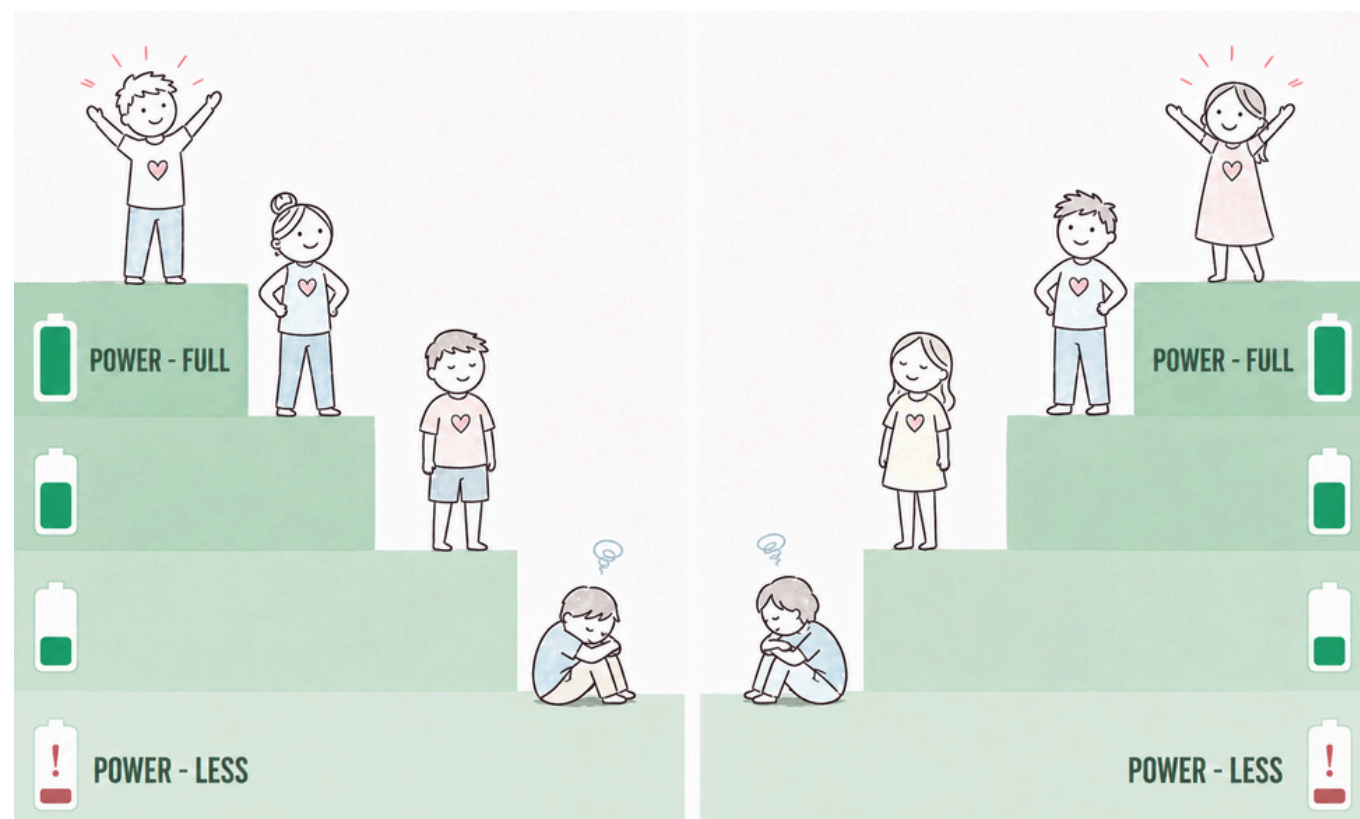
The answer is: "he exhausted himself, and this reflected on his behavior and attitude. He barely had any energy to sustain his physical existence and not nearly enough to fuel his pursuits of helping others. Comparing him to a mobile phone, we could say he emptied his battery."



Questions for debriefing:

- Have you ever met an employee that is passing by a similar situation like Sam?
- What do you think the contributing factors for exhaustion at work could be?
- How do you protect yourself from exhaustion at work?
- Have you ever heard about self-care concept? What does it mean to you?
- Have you participated in self-care sessions or program before? If yes, how it was?

NB! The path to exhaustion is a gradual process. Every time we neglect our own care, we move closer to burnout. Exhaustion can be both emotional and physical. Recovery and the process of restoring our energy to "fully charged" state also takes time.



During the next sessions, we will explore in depth the causes of exhaustion and how we can protect ourselves from it.

Exercise: challenging situations at work (30 min)

1. Ask participants to recall a work situation that felt emotionally challenging and had a personal impact on them. What specifically in the situation or in the person's story affected you? How did it affect you?
2. How did you deal with it?
3. How do skills that help you care for yourself and your colleagues support you in managing stress related to work??
4. Name one or more reasons for working in the humanitarian field despite the challenges??

To conclude the session

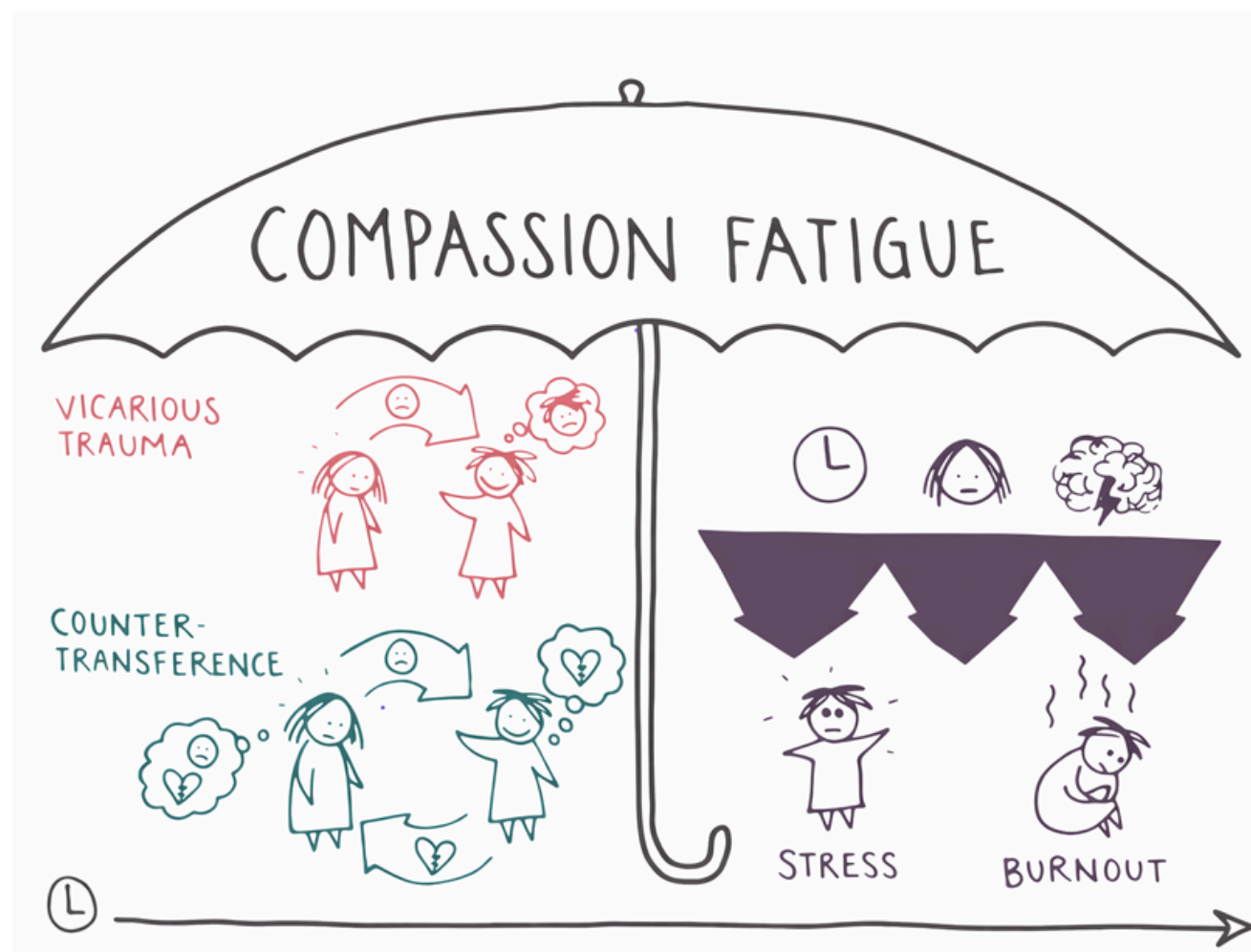
Ask participants to share one takeaway from today's session; a feeling, a new insight, or a suggestion.

NOTES

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal dashed lines, typical of primary school writing paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

IMPACT OF PSYCHOSOCIAL ADVERSITY ON FRONT-LINERS

This paper presents Compassion Fatigue as an umbrella concept, explaining its different forms and the effects of working in emotionally challenging roles.



This section is based on the work of Babette Rothschild.

CLARIFICATIONS OF CONCEPTS**Compassion Fatigue**

A general term that refers to the emotional and physical distress that can result from working with people who are suffering. It can take different forms and often develops gradually and unconsciously, with both psychological and physical consequences.

Vicarious Traumatization

is one form of Compassion Fatigue. It refers to the negative impact that can occur when a person is repeatedly exposed to accounts of another individual's trauma. Anyone working in a helping role, particularly in domestic or gender-based violence, may be at risk of vicarious traumatization. Sometimes described as 'catching the trauma', as if it was a contagious disease. Even when not directly involved in the client's traumatic event, therapists, social workers, and other front-liners can experience it through empathy and emotional engagement. The experience is similar to the way people can feel strong emotions while watching an intense scene in a film. Although the event is not happening to you directly, your body and emotions may respond as if it were.

Countertransference

occurs when a beneficiary's story or situation triggers personal feelings, memories, or experiences in the helper. It is very important to be aware of their own history and emotional triggers as these can influence their behavior in the helping relationship. The helper's reactions to a client come from their own personal experience.

Stress and Burnout

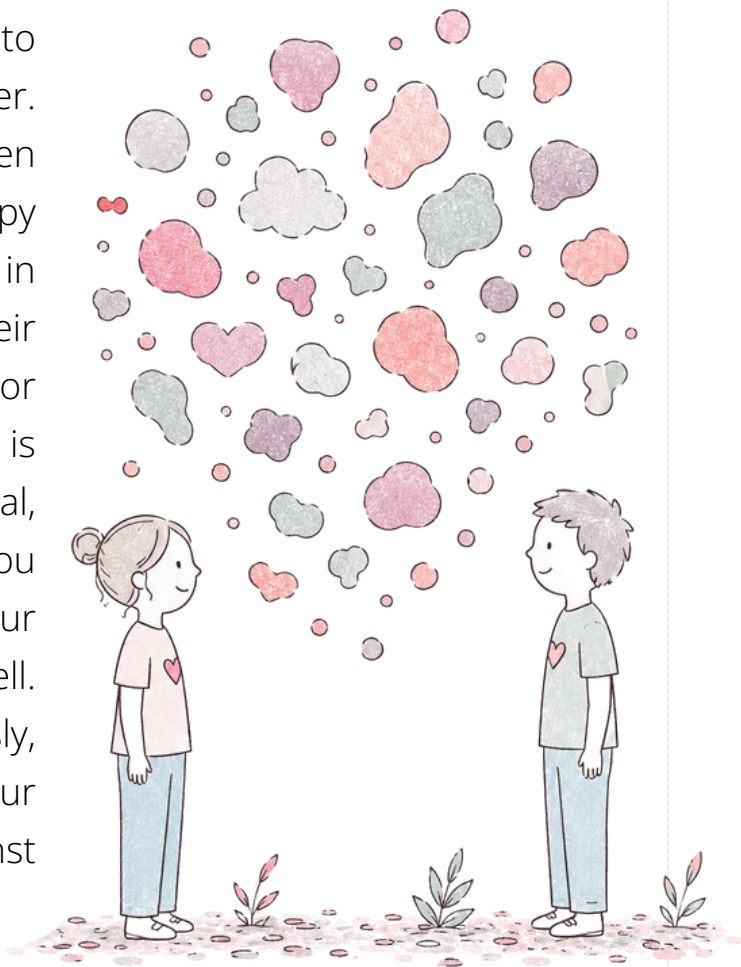
reactions which show after longer periods of pressure, and they are most often related to working conditions, which also means that the remedy mainly should be found in improving working conditions. While the individual worker can try to adapt healthier work habits, the responsibility of preventing and overcoming stress and burnout ultimately lies with the workplace, who is responsible for providing optimal conditions for the workers to thrive.

Burnout is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion cause by long-term stress and excessive workload. It can lead to extreme fatigue, loss of motivation, reduced effectiveness, and a feeling of being overwhelmed or disconnected from work.

Somatic Empathy

Empathy has been essential for the survival and evolution of mankind. The ability to put oneself in someone else’s place has tied people together, but there is also a drawback; to take on another person’s burden through empathy can be exhausting.

Mirror neurons in our brain enable us to ‘read’ / understand and imitate each other. Individuals in a close, social relation often spontaneously and unconsciously copy facial expressions and postures, which in turn creates similar reactions in their nervous systems. The theory of mirror neurons is an argument that empathy is not only psychological but also physical, defined as somatic empathy. When you unconsciously mirror bodily postures, your breathing and feelings are copied as well. Mirror neurons often work unconsciously, but by being aware and controlling your mirroring, you can protect yourself against vicarious traumatization



Comparison between
VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND, STRESS AND BURNOUT IMPACT

The below table compares the types of negative impact typically experienced by social workers and helpers, showing that while vicarious trauma has to do with individual relations between helper and client, stress and burnout are primarily influenced by working conditions.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA	STRESS AND BURNOUT
Cumulative, with symptoms that are unique to each individual	Cumulative, usually over a long period of time
Not necessarily predictable	Predictable
Life dissatisfaction	Work dissatisfaction
Permeates work and home	Evident in work environment
Related to empathic relationship with clients’ traumatic experiences	Related to work environment conditions
Can lead to health problems	Can lead to health problems
Feel out of control	Feel under pressure
Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder	Lack of motivation and/or energy
May have triggers that are unique to each individual	No evidence of triggers
The remedy is treatment of self, similar to trauma treatment	The remedy is time away from work to recharge (vacation, stress leave) or a positive change in work environment (improved conditions or sometimes a new job)

FACILITATION OF THE SESSION

Framing

Start by giving a brief introduction to the learning objectives of the session and the different exercises you will introduce to the participants during the session.

Exercise: Film A, 30'

Start with film A about how working within an emotionally demanding context can have a negative effect on our quality of life. Follow the link to the short film on Compassion Fatigue: [Click here](#).

Follow up with a short discussion:

- What is the film about?
- What signs or symptoms of stress did you notice in the film?
- Which of these symptoms have you personally experienced in your work?
- Did the film mention any coping or support strategies? Which of these have you already tried?
- How being aware of early signs of burnout can protect us from falling apart?
- What is the main message or key takeaway from the film?

Exercise: Compassion fatigue concept, 30'

Make a short presentation to build a shared understanding of Compassion Fatigue, and to clarify the different concepts that fall under this umbrella (use the information from the background paper).

Exercise: Risk and protective factors, 30'

- After exploring the different types of Compassion Fatigue, introduce the next step: identifying the risk and protective factors that help prevent and manage it effectively.
- Ask participants to draw an umbrella, after they have taken into consideration the different types of Compassion Fatigue, where they mention the risk factors over the umbrella and the protective factors under the umbrella.
- Give participants 10' minutes for this exercise. .

Questions for debriefing:

- What was the difficulty level on identifying the different types of Compassion Fatigue?
- What emotions do you feel seeing written the risk and protective factors in front of you?
- How does being aware of the risk and protective factors could protect you from Compassion Fatigue?



Exercise: sweeping machine (relaxation activity), 20'

- Ask participants to sit or stand in a comfortable way.
- Ask them to bring forth in their imagination a stressful day (not too stressful) to the present.
- Participants should close their eyes if possible and take a deep breath (slowly and repetitively).
- Once they feel calm and ready, instruct the participants to imagine holding a broomstick.
- They should envision the broomstick sweeping all over their body, starting from the top of their heads towards their feet.
- As they are sweeping over their body, ask participants to imagine throwing all their negative thoughts, stress and feelings.
- The steps should be executed slowly, breathing deep with every movement.

To reassure participants, acknowledge the fact that it may feel strange at the beginning of the exercise, but to persevere and carry on.

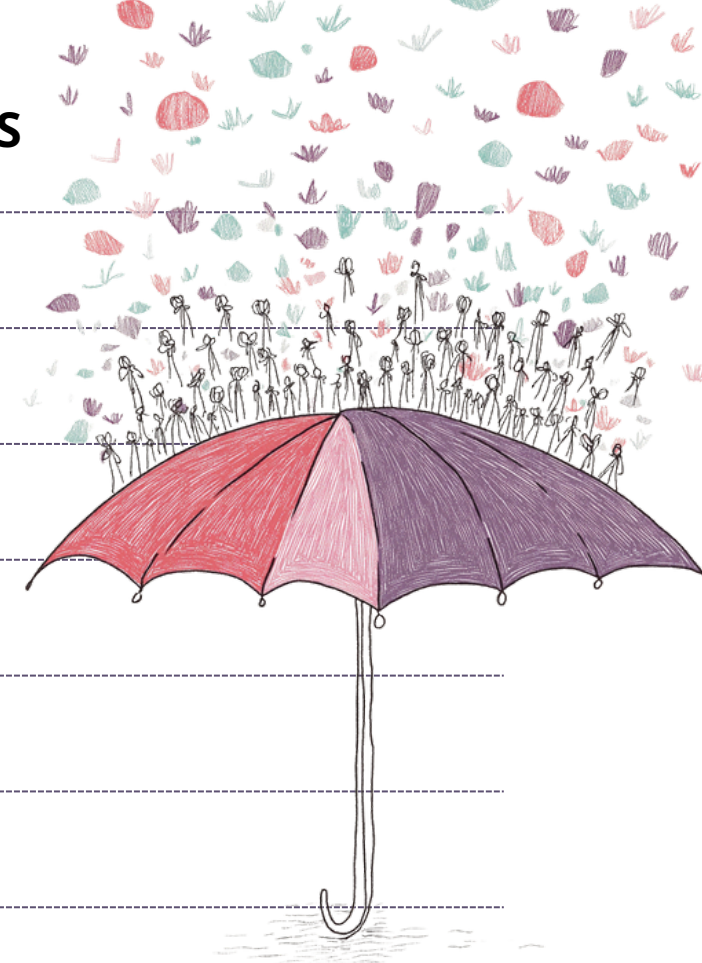
- After they have finished, ask the following:
- How did you feel before, during, and after the broomstick exercise?
- Did help you relieve from your stress?

To conclude, 10'

Thank participants for their participation and ask them to share one feeling, suggestion, or information after the session concluded.



NOTES



SHORT DESCRIPTION

This session focuses on Vicarious Trauma and introduces a variety of tools to take care of yourself and to avoid absorbing survivors' trauma.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

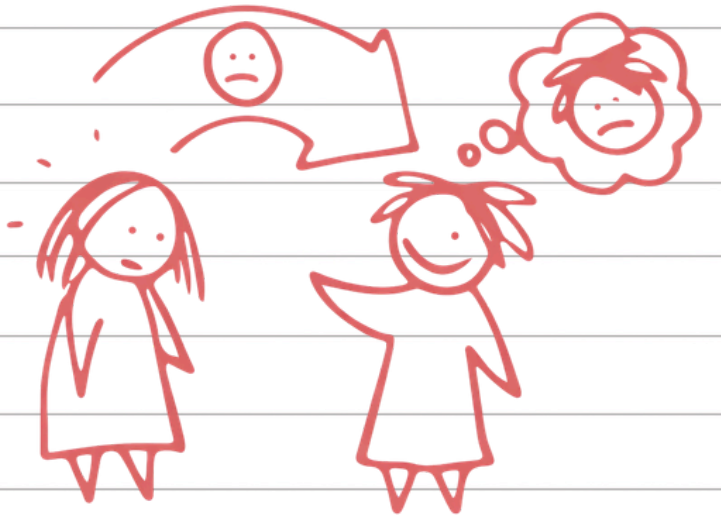
- Identify types of trauma- mainly Vicarious trauma.
- Adopt specific tools in order to protect themselves from vicarious traumatization.

INTRODUCTION

Vicarious Traumatization: is one form of Compassion Fatigue. It refers to the negative impact that can occur when a person is repeatedly exposed to accounts of another individual's trauma. Anyone working in a helping role, particularly in domestic or gender-based violence, may be at risk of vicarious traumatization. Sometimes described as 'catching the trauma', as if it was a contagious disease. Even when not directly involved in the client's traumatic event, therapists, social workers, and other front-liners can experience it through empathy and emotional engagement. The experience is similar to the way people can feel strong emotions while watching an intense scene in a film. Although the event is not happening to you directly, your body and emotions may respond as if it were.

Vicarious Traumatization is not always a long-term condition. It occurs when the emotional impact of a client's experiences affects the helper through natural processes such as empathy, somatic responses, and mirroring (mirror neurons).

VICARIOUS
TRAUMA

**OTHER FORMS OF TRAUMATIZATION**

In addition to Vicarious Traumatization (described above), two other forms of trauma can be identified:

Primary Traumatization

Primary Traumatization refers to the direct impact of a traumatic event on the person who experienced it. This includes survivors of events, such as violence, accidents, accidental loss of a loved one, or other distressing experiences. Helpers and front-liners can also carry their own traumatic experiences. For example, if a case worker has a personal history of domestic violence, this experience might be triggered when working with survivors in a shelter.

Secondary Traumatization

Refers to the impact of a traumatic event on people who were not the direct victims but were affected by it. It can occur in two main situations. The first involves family members or close relatives who are emotionally affected by a loved one's trauma because of their close relationship. For example, the partner of a survivor of sexual assault can experience distress related to the event. The second situation involves helpers or professionals who directly witness a traumatic incident. Although they were not the primary victims, the experience of seeing or hearing the event in person can have a strong emotional impact. In these cases, the trauma results from direct exposure to the event or its immediate aftermath, rather than from repeated exposure to clients' stories, as in vicarious traumatization.

NB! Vicarious Trauma is sometimes, wrongfully, referred to as Secondary Trauma.



THE NEUROPHYSIOLOGY OF AROUSAL

The Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) has two branches: The Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) and the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS).

The SNS is activated when faced with serious danger, and prepares the body for fight, flight, freeze or Fawn response. Symptoms of high SNS arousal is dry mouth, cold skin, dilated pupils, and increased respiration.

On the other hand, the PNS is activated in situations of rest and relaxation. Symptoms include warm skin, slower heart rate and respiration, and wet mouth.

The SNS and PNS complement each other and a certain balance between the two is needed in order for an individual to function and feel well.

When the body is exposed to prolonged stress without sufficient rest, the ANS can begin to react to everyday challenges as if they were life-threatening. When your ANS is under constant stress, it can become less effective at regulating the body's adequate responses. This can increase the risk of vicarious traumatization and burnout. For this reason, it is important to learn how to take care of yourself and protect your well-being. This includes strengthening body awareness, learning how to recognize signs of stress and arousal, and using practical tools that help prevent and manage their impact.

FACILITATION OF THE SESSION

Framing

Start by briefly introducing the session objectives and the exercises that participants will take part in.

Exercise: Take a deep breath, 10'

Guide participants through this simple breathing exercise:

- Ask the participants to sit back on their chairs, both feet placed on the ground, arms hanging down, or hands resting on their lap. They can choose to close their eyes or keep them open.
- Now, ask participants to take a slow, deep breath in through the nose, hold it for a few seconds, and then exhale slowly in one long motion through the mouth. Pause for a few seconds before repeating this cycle several times (3-4 times and you can go up to 8 to 10 times).

Afterwards, invite the participants to take a moment to notice how they feel. Ask them: 'How do you feel now?' and 'Do you notice any difference compared to before the exercise?'

NB! Learning to regulate bodily responses, such as breathing, helps reduce stress and supports emotional regulation when working in emotionally demanding situations.

Trainer presentation: Make a presentation where you, 30'

Provide a short presentation explaining the different types of traumatization (vicarious, primary and secondary). Place particular emphasis on vicarious traumatization as a key risk for people working in helping roles.

Exercise: Getting to know yourself: Body and Arousal Awareness (mirroring) (40 min):

- Divide participants in pairs and assign one person as A and the other as B.
- Before starting, ask both participants to take a moment to observe their current state. They should notice their body sensations, such as temperature, muscle tension, breathing pattern, and any internal sensations. They should also reflect on their emotional state and overall mood.
- Ask participant A to think of a situation that carries some emotional charge. The emotions can be pleasant or mildly uncomfortable (for example: happy, sad, irritated, or anxious). It should not be traumatic or highly stressful.
- A then adopts a body posture (sitting, standing, or crouching) that reflects that situation and holds the position without moving.
- While A maintains the posture, B mirrors (copies) A's position as accurately as possible.
- While holding the position, ask B the following:

1. What adjustments did I make with my body to take this posture? Which muscles are tense or relaxed? Where do I twist, bend, or lean?
2. What physical sensations do I become aware of? What changes of temperature, tension, tingling, discomfort, or ease? Where?
3. Do any images, memories, smells, or other impressions come to my mind?
4. What emotions do I notice?
5. What thoughts or internal dialogue are present (or other verbalizations, e.g. songs)?

- After B has reflected on these points, both participants can relax and sit facing each other. B shares their observations while A listens without interrupting.
- B can use the following structure for feedback:

1. "When I took your posture, my body..."
2. I noticed these physical sensations"
3. I saw\heard\smelled\tasted... (describe images)".
4. I felt... (emotions)".
5. "I thought....".

- After B finishes, A shares the situation they were embodying, and describes their own body sensations, emotions, and thoughts.
- A and B then briefly discuss similarities and differences in their experiences.

When giving feedback, the facilitator should remember to talk about his own experience.

NB! Arousal awareness is one form of body awareness that focuses on recognizing signs of activation or stress in the nervous systems.

NB! We naturally and often unconsciously mirror each other's facial expressions and body posture. In counselling settings, mirroring is a powerful way of creating a sense of comfort and connection, however, it is also important to be aware of when we mirror and when we choose not to. For the helper, this can help avoid vicarious traumatization, and allows them to remain grounded and stable for the person they support.

Exercise - Find your Sensory Anchor – Find your Safe Place, 30'

A sensory anchor is a positive memory, image, smell or place that helps you feel calm and safe. The technique of 'anchoring' is used to pull the focus away from a distressing memory or situation. When working in emotionally demanding contexts, such as domestic violence support, a sensory anchor can help reduce intense stress or emotional activation. An effective sensory anchor should have an immediate effect.

Introduce the activity by explaining that participants will be guided through a short relaxation exercise to create a mental image of a place where they feel comfortable and safe, which they can call their "Safe Place". This "Safe Space" can be used as a sensory anchor in the future, as a tool to help calm themselves when they feel emotionally overwhelmed by their work.

- Use Handout 1 for this exercise. Detailed instructions are included in the handout.

Debriefing the exercise:

- How did it feel to do this exercise? • What did you notice happening in your body or mind?
- Was it easy or difficult to imagine a safe place for yourself? Why?
- How did you feel while you were in your safe place?
- Was this a place you already knew, or did you imagine a new one? Was there anything that surprised you during this exercise?
- Do you feel you can easily recall your safe place? How can you use your safe place during your work?
- Do you think this tool could have a positive impact on your well-being at work? What steps will you take to start using this tool in your daily practice??

To conclude, 10'

Thank participants and invite them to share one feeling, suggestion, insight from the session.

HANDOUT ONE

HYPNOTIC EXERCISE FOR RELAXING THE BODY AND MIND - MY SAFE PLACE

INSTRUCTIONS: HOW TO FACILITATE THIS EXERCISE

Before starting the exercise, take a moment to calm and center yourself. Read the instructions slowly and in a gentle, steady voice. Pause regularly between sentences, especially when participants are asked to imagine or notice something. Before you start, set the frame of the exercise.

For example: "This is a guided meditation exercise to help you calm your body and mind. The exercise will begin by XX and end by XX (e.g. a sound you produce, a specific word or just you saying out loud that you start and finish). I will guide you through the process with my voice." At the end of the exercise, after asking participants to open their eyes, allow a few quiet moments before inviting them to move or return to their seats. You can then offer the optional follow-up exercise of drawing or naming their safe place.

- Lie down on your back or sit comfortably. You can keep your eyes open or close them, whatever feels comfortable.
- Take a slow breath in, allowing your stomach to expand like a balloon.
- Place one hand on your stomach and notice the movement as you breathe.
- Take three slow, deep breaths in. Notice whether your body begins to feel softer, warmer or more relaxed.
- Now, move your attention to your feet. Notice your toes. Are they still or moving? Simply observe?

- Bring your attention to your knees. Notice their position. Are they bent or straight?
- Now, bring your attention to your back. Notice how it feels. Is it tensed or relaxed? How does it connect to the chair or the ground?
- Now, focus on your shoulders. Are they lifted or relaxed? Allow them to soften if possible.
- Bring your attention to your head. Now gently guide your mind to a place where you feel safe and comfortable. It can be a real place you know or one you imagine. It can be somewhere you have been before or somewhere you would like to be. It can be indoors or outdoors, in nature or at home, on a beach, in a comfortable room, or with people you trust and feel safe with.
- Notice your Safe Place? Where are you? How does it feel to be there?
- Are you alone or is someone with you?
- This can be private and just for you?
- Notice any details. What do you see? Are there colors, sounds, or scents?
- Take a moment to fully experience your Safe Place and how your body feels there.
- When you feel ready, slowly bring your attention back and gently open your eyes.

SHORT DESCRIPTION

This session introduces the concept of Countertransference. Although it is often overlooked in discussions of compassion fatigue, countertransference is a key challenge for people working in helping roles. Participants will reflect on their personal life experiences to increase self-awareness and reduce the risk of those experiences influencing their professional interactions.

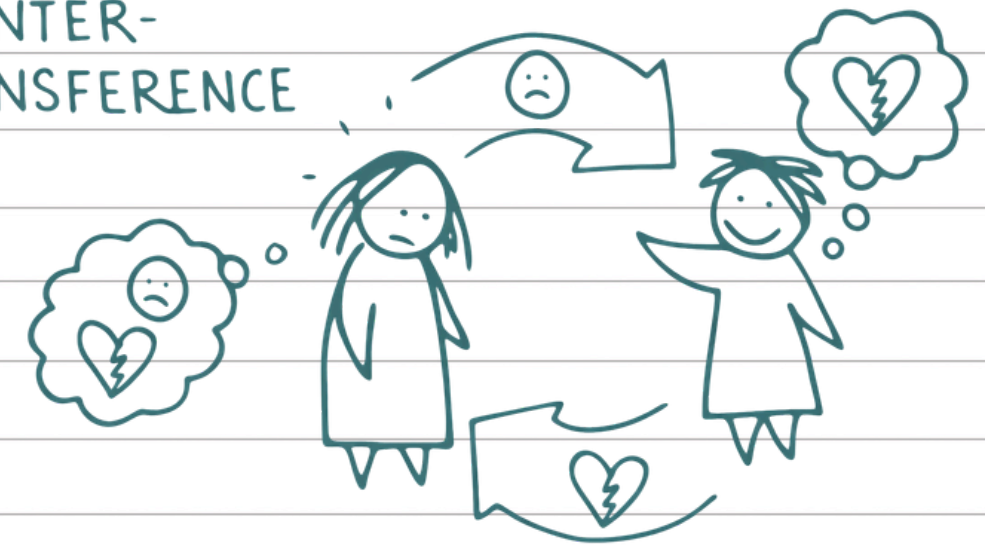
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify and reflect on their own particular areas of vulnerability related to countertransference.
- Apply techniques that help them stay focused, present, and professionally grounded.

INTRODUCTION

When working with people who have experienced distress and trauma, a beneficiary's story can sometimes trigger memories or emotions from our own lives. When we are aware of our own personal history and reactions, we are better able to manage them and maintain a professional and supportive approach. This awareness benefits both the helper and the people they support.

NB! Inform the participants that the session will be heavy emotionally, so they have the chance to answer the questions they feel comfortable with.

**COUNTER-
TRANSFERENCE**

Countertransference literally means 'to transfer back'. It refers to a situation where a helper brings their own personal experiences, feelings or unresolved issues into their interaction with a beneficiary. When this happens, it can compromise the effectiveness of the support.

As an example: During a counseling session, a beneficiary talks about a difficult relationship with their mother, which was characterized by neglect and shaming. The social worker recognizes similarities with their own relationship to their mother. Their personal memories and unresolved emotions begin to influence how they interpret the situation and how they respond. This can happen without the helper being fully aware of it. They may not consciously think about their own experience but their personal history still shapes their reactions.

As a result, the helper can jump to conclusions and make assumptions that do not reflect the reality of the beneficiary, thus decreasing their chance of providing useful counseling. In some cases, this can increase the persons' distress.

In brief, when our own history is activated, we can lose the ability to listen openly and curiously. Self-awareness is essential to remain present and provide support that responds to the needs of the person we are helping.

WHAT TO DO?

In order to prevent harmful countertransference from helper to beneficiary, it is important for people working in helping roles to develop awareness of their own personal history. The better we understand our experiences, emotions and unresolved issues, the easier it becomes to recognize when they are triggered in our professional life and navigate around them.

FACILITATION OF THE SESSION

Framing

Begin the session by briefly presenting the learning objectives of the session and an overview of the different exercises.

Exercise: Individual Work, A special case, 20'

This exercise is designed to open the session and should be introduced with minimal explanation.

- Make sure all participants have paper and pen.
- Ask participants to take 10 minutes to reflect silently on the cases they have worked with and choose one that affected them emotionally. It can be a case where they developed strong sympathy for a beneficiary, or where they experienced difficult emotions such as impatience, irritation, disgust, discomfort, or any reaction that felt more intense than usual.
- Ask them to describe the case using key words and to note their emotional reaction.
- Inform participants that you will return to these cases later in the session and ask them to keep their notes. Then move on.

Trainer Presentation: Countertransference, 30'

Provide a brief presentation explaining the concept of Countertransference and illustrating it with practical examples. You can use the background paper on Countertransference as a reference. You can also choose to include Handout 1 from the Compassion Fatigue session, which shows Countertransference as one form of Compassion Fatigue.

Exercise: Individual Work, Taking a self-history, 40'

Introduce this exercise by explaining that participants will reflect individually, investigating their own lives and histories.

Use the instructions in Handout 1: Taking a Self-History.

- Ensure each participant has a pen and enough paper. Encourage them to write brief notes or key words.
- Distribute one copy of Handout 1: Taking a Self-History to each participant.
- Invite participants to spread out.
- Instruct them when to be back.

Questions that can be used for the debriefing/sum-up:

- How did you feel while doing this exercise?
- How was it to take reflect on your personal history? Did you find it easy or difficult? Why?
- How was it to go through your life experiences in a structured way using the handout?
- What did you notice as you moved through the exercise?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Are you usually aware of your own personal history and reactions in your daily work?
- Did this exercise bring any new insight?
- How can you use these insights in your work?
- Would anyone like to share a new awareness or learning from this exercise?
- Do you think this exercise will influence how you approach your work? If so, how?

NB! As the Taking a Self-History exercise is both lengthy and might revoke difficult memories for the participants, now is a good time to take a break, before moving on to the next exercise.

Exercise: Stay grounded, 15-20'

When memories, emotions, or thoughts from our past are triggered during our work, it is important to stay focused and connected to the present. Grounding ourselves in the present helps us remain aware of what is happening here and now, so that our reactions do not interfere with the support we provide.

- Invite participants to sit comfortably.
- Ask them to take a slow, deep breath.
- Guide them to bring their attention to their breathing, noticing how the air fills their lungs and then leaves their body.
- Ask participants to notice the physical support around them: the chair beneath their body and their feet pressing into the floor.
- Ask participants to focus on their surrounding using the following sequence: to name five things they can see, four things they can touch, three things they can hear, two things they can smell, and one thing they can taste.

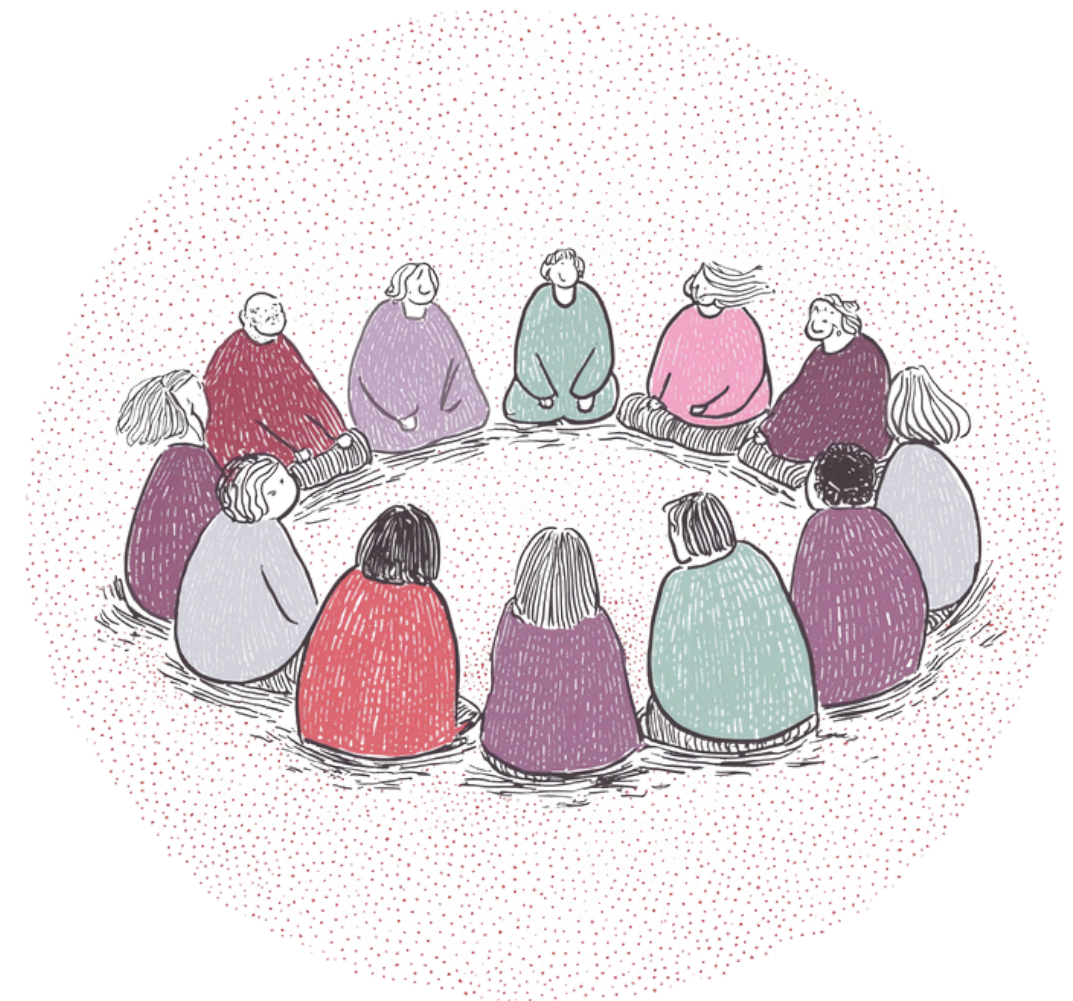
Debriefing questions:

- Was it easy or difficult to follow the exercise?
- How does it feel to focus on the present moment?
- Have you used this or a similar grounding technique before?
- How might this exercise help you in your daily life or professional work?

NB! Grounding technique doesn't resolve the past issues, it only support the helper to stay focused in the present moment until they are ready to address those experiences in a safe and appropriate way.

To conclude, 10'

Thank participants for their participation and ask them to share one feeling, suggestion, information after they have finished the session.



HANDOUT ONE

TAKING A SELF- HISTORY

Below are suggested areas for personal reflection. You can choose the questions that feel relevant to you and skip any that you prefer not to answer. You can also add others that feel important.

1. Take note of your current living situation and relationship status. Are you satisfied with this aspect of your life?
2. If you have any children, note their ages and reflect on your relationship with them. Consider the overall family dynamics and the physical and emotional well-being of family member.
3. Reflect on your own physical and mental health. Consider your health history and your current level of well-being.
4. List close friends and extended family members. How supportive are these relationships? Do you feel supported overall? Are there responsibilities that feel heavy? What brings you joy in your relationships? What brings you stress or emotional distress?
5. Reflect on your work and your workplace. What aspects do you enjoy the most? What about the less? Which aspects are challenging or stressful? Do you feel supported by colleagues or supervisors? Are you satisfied with your career path, or do you wish for changes in terms of career or workplace? Do you look forward to retirement or not?
6. Consider your financial situation. Does it feel stable or is this a source of stress?

7. Reflect on your family-of-origin constellation. Think back at least two generations, including grandparents. You can draw a family map or genogram to understand relationships, major events, losses, or patterns. Include details such as the time of death and death causes.
8. Identify significant life events that have had significant emotional impact, whether positive or difficult.
9. Reflect on your spiritual or personal beliefs, whether or not they are part of a formal religion.
10. Consider your relationship with nature or the environment.
11. After completing this overall reflection, consider: which aspects of your personal history may strengthen your work? Which experiences or vulnerabilities might influence your reaction or affect your professional role?



SHORT DESCRIPTION

This session explores workplace stress and its potential progression to burnout. It addresses stress on three levels: individual – group/manager – organizational. The session emphasizes that organizations play a key role in creating working conditions that help prevent stress and burnout. Participants will practice simple meditation techniques, and work in groups to identify needs and tools to reduce stress.

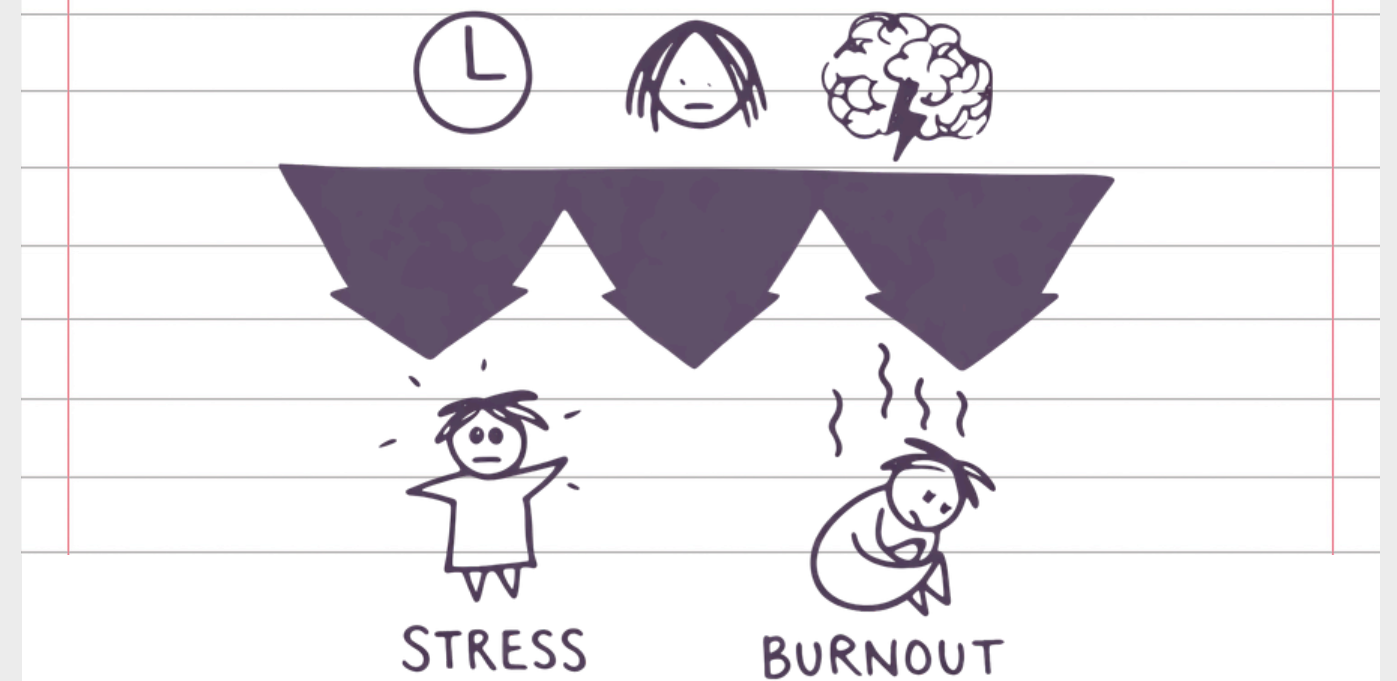
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain the basic neurological response to stress.
- Identify signs of stress in themselves and others
- Apply practical tools to reduce stress at the individual, team, and organizational level

INTRODUCTION

Stress is the body's natural response to pressure or demands. It can be a helpful signal that we need rest or support. However, when stress continues for a long period of time, or when we are unable to recover, it can begin to affect our physical health, emotions and behavior. Ongoing stress often leads to feelings of inadequacy or self-blame, as people may interpret their difficulties as personal failure rather than a response to challenging conditions.

If prolonged stress is not addressed, it can eventually lead to burnout.



STRESS AND THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

The nervous system has two main branches: The Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS), which prepares the body to respond to danger by increasing alertness and energy, and the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS), which helps the body to relax, recover, and restore balance. When the SNS is activated for long periods of times, such as during ongoing work pressure or overload, the PNS has less opportunity to restore the body. Over time, this imbalance can affect both physical health and brain functioning.

HOW STRESS AFFECTS OUR BRAIN FUNCTIONING?

Amygdala: acts as the brain's alarm system. It detects potential threats and triggers the release of stress hormones, preparing the body to fight, flee, or freeze. With ongoing or intense, the amygdala can become overactive. When this happens, the 'alarm bell' may continue to respond even when there is no real danger.

Hippocampus: plays an important role in learning and memory. Prolonged or toxic stress can affect its functioning, making it more difficult to store and recall new information.

PREFRONTAL CORTEX

supports executive functions such as concentration, decision making, and impulse control. High levels of stress can reduce its effectiveness, making it harder to focus, think clearly, and make decisions.

FORMS OF STRESS

The following are some of the common signs and symptoms of stress:

PHYSICAL EFFECTS	MOOD EFFECTS	BEHAVIOUR EFFECTS
• Headache • Muscle tension / pain • Chest pain • Lack of energy • Stomach upset • Sleep problems • Less sex drive	• Anxiety • Restlessness • Lack of motivation • Lack of focus • Irritability / anger • Sadness / depression • Feeling overwhelmed	• Overeating / undereating • Angry outbursts • Drug / alcohol abuse • (Increased) smoking • Social withdrawal • Less physical exercise

BURNOUT

Burnout is a response to excessive and persistent exposure to stress, difficult working conditions, and ongoing pressure that exceeds a person's ability to cope.

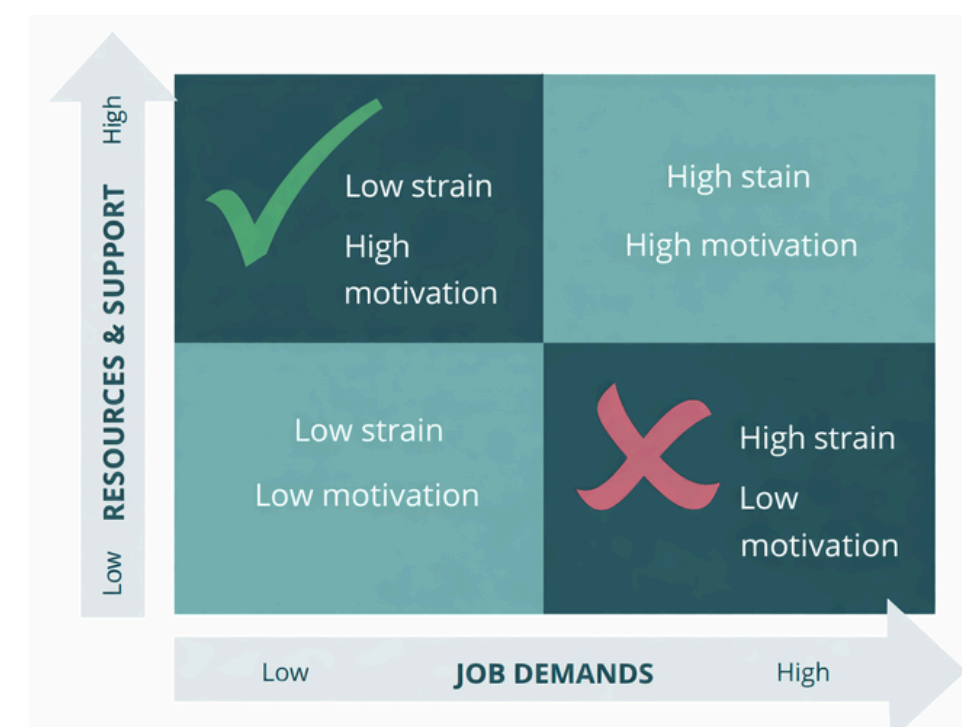
Burnout is characterized as "emotional exhaustion", depersonalization (feeling that one's thoughts are unreal or do not belong to oneself), and reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

Burnout affects behaviors in different ways; at first, a person may lose interest or enthusiasm to take on certain roles. Over time, they can feel constantly tired, overwhelmed, or unable to manage daily tasks. This can lead to feelings of frustration, pessimism, helplessness, or irritability,

Burnout is also associated with high emotional demand without adequate support, recognition, or job satisfaction. Such situations can increase vulnerability and leave the person exposed to burnout. In some cases, this can lead people to withdraw from their roles or leave work that is meaningful to them.

Workplace burnout is usually triggered by a combination of factors, including excessive workload with inadequate resources, high accountability with little control, limited recognition or job satisfaction, interpersonal conflict or social isolation, unequal or unfair treatment, and a lack of clarity about purpose or values.

While some roles may be more meaningful than others, ongoing demands that exceed available resources can gradually reduce energy, engagement, and motivation, as illustrated in the chart below.



Resources:

Situations and experiences created by an employer that help workers meet demands. Examples are: good support, helpful feedback, and the freedom to manage your own time.

Demands:

Pressures that call on us to use our resourcefulness and energy – physical, mental, and emotional – all of which can be stressful if we're overtaxed and inadequately supported.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE WORKPLACE

Stress is one form of Compassion Fatigue. However, unlike Vicarious Trauma and Countertransference, which are linked to the relationship between helper and beneficiary, stress is largely influenced by working conditions. Therefore, it is important to understand and address stress at different levels.

The individual level

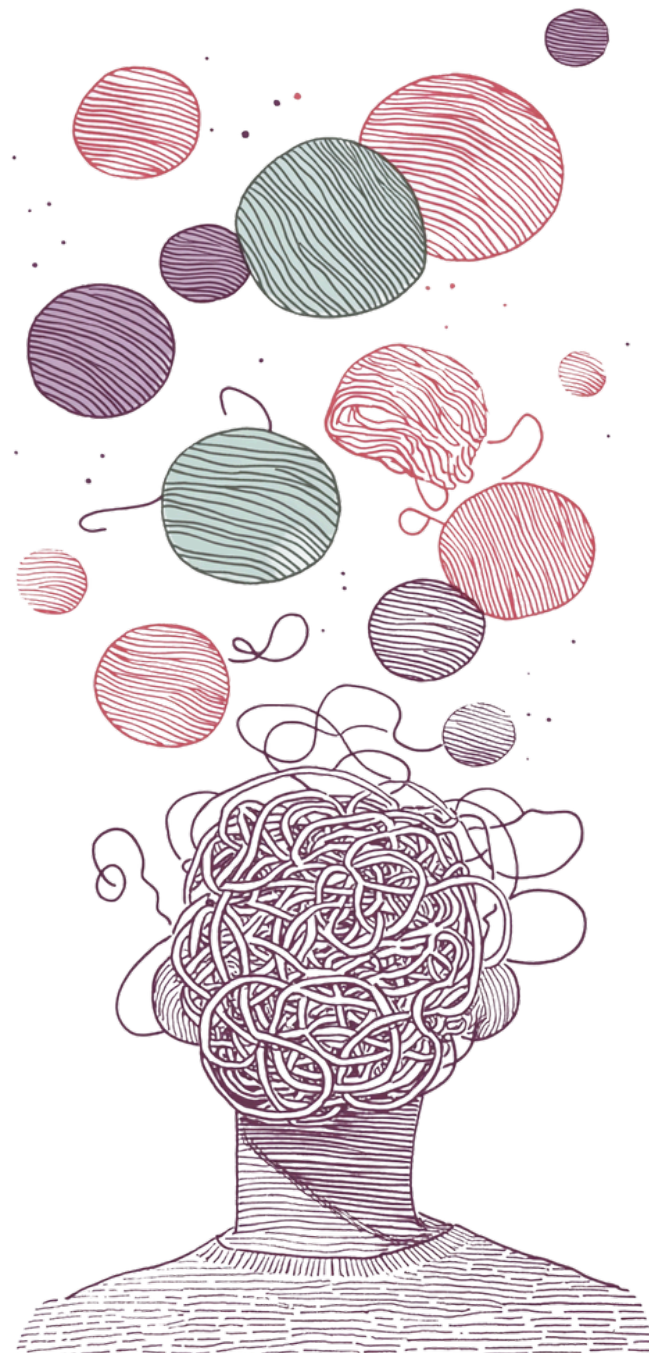
There are many actions individuals can take to support their well-being. These include maintaining healthy eating habits, practicing relaxation or meditation, engaging in physical activity, spending time in nature, and making time for hobbies and personal interests.

The team/manager level

Teams and supervisors play an important role in supporting staff well-being. Colleagues can look out for one another, create a supportive environment, and take action when signs of stress appear.

The organizational level

It is the responsibility of upper management to create working conditions that enable staff to perform their roles in a safe, effective and sustainable way. The conditions can include, but are not limited to, a balanced workload, regular supervision and debriefings, supportive leadership, clear roles and responsibilities, and a healthy work environment.



FACILITATION OF THE SESSION

Framing

Begin the session by briefly presenting the learning objectives of the session and an overview of the different exercises.

Trainer Presentation: Stress, 30'

Provide a short presentation explaining the concepts of stress and burnout, and describe common signs and symptoms of stress. Make sure to emphasize that stress reactions are completely normal and serve as important signals that the body is under pressure. Recognizing these reactions helps us take care of ourselves and support each other.

Introduce the three levels of addressing stress: individual – team/manager/ organizational. Explain that this framework helps identify practical ways to prevent stress and burnout.

Exercise: What do you recognize?, 15'

- Invite participants to reflect on stress symptoms they recognize in themselves.
- Ensure everyone has pen and paper.
- Give the participants 3-5 minutes to note the symptoms they recognize from the list presented, as well as any other stress-related signs they have experienced.
- Ask participants either to share their notes verbally, or to place them on a flip chart or board. You do not need to discuss the result, but can most likely use the findings to establish that (varying levels of) stress is a well-known condition to most.

Exercise: Individual stress level reduction

SELF-CARE WHEEL, 30'

The Self-Care Wheel covers six areas of well-being: physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, personal and professional. The wheel helps participants recognize what they already do for self-care, which can create a rather empowering feeling, but it also shows you which areas you might need to pay more attention to.

- Distribute two blank copies of the Self-Care Wheel to each participant.
- Briefly explain the six areas it covers.
- Give the participants 15 minutes to work in individually and silently, listing all the self-care practices they already use.

Questions for debriefing:

- Did your wheel surprise you?
- Which self-care tool(s) or practices would you recommend to others?
- In which areas did you write the most? The least?
- Do you notice a general pattern for the participants as a whole?
- If someone has many practices in an area where others have few, invite them to elaborate on this specific area.
- Are there specific areas where you would like to strengthen your self-care?

Proceed to the next part of the exercise.

- Ask participants to use the second blank Self-Care Wheel.
- Working individually and silently, they now list all the tools and activities they would like to explore. Encourage them to use handouts and/notes on the board or flip chart for inspiration.
- Ask participants to select 2-3 tools they will take active steps to implement at work.

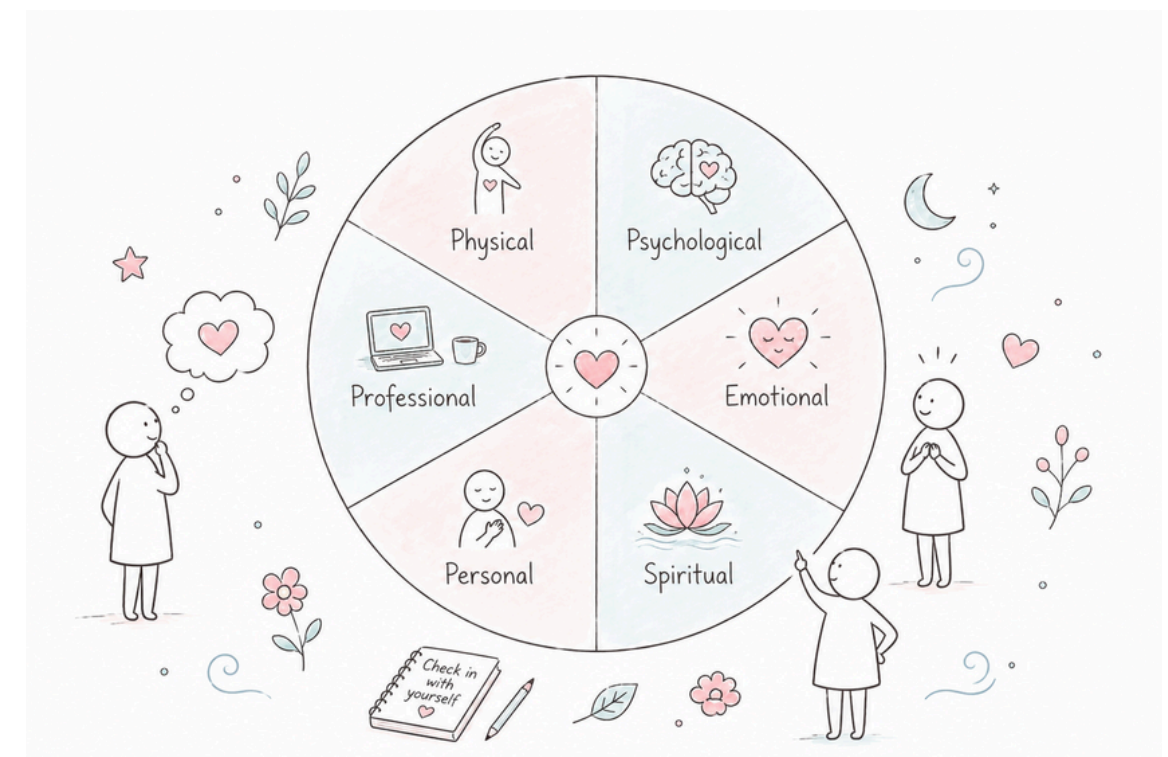
Reflection question: "What is the most important insight you gained from this experience?"

Exercise: Group/Manager Level Stress Reduction, 30'

This exercise explores stress reduction tools at the team/manager level.

- Ask participants to work individually for 5 minutes, writing down three things colleagues can do to support each other and three actions a manager could take to reduce stress.
- Divide the participants into groups of 3-4.
- Give the groups 15 minutes to share their thoughts.
- Provide one copy per group of **Handout 2: Preventing and Reducing Stress**. Remember to specify that this exercise focuses specifically on the team/manager level.
- Based on their own ideas, and the lists provided in the handout, ask each group to select one tool each and develop a plan for implementing it at the work place. They should, as a minimum, specify key steps, responsible key actors, and timeline. Encourage groups to select different tools.
- Manage time clearly and give reminders.
- Gather participants in plenary and ask each group to present their implementation plan.

Closing Round: Invite each participant to share one or two key takeaways from this activity.



Exercise: Time for a positive boost exercise, 15-20'

While it is easy to focus on what's missing, it is equally important to recognize what is already working well. This exercise helps build a sense of acknowledgement and optimism, which in itself might increase satisfaction.

- Divide the participants into groups of 3-4. When possible, group people from the same workplace together. Distribute the handout to each groups.
- Ask groups to review the lists and mark what is already fully or partially in place.
- Invite them to write down any additional implemented stress prevention and reduction efforts, which might not be mentioned in the lists.
- Ask each group to briefly share how many measures are already implemented.
- Conclude with a short debrief discussion.

To conclude, 10'

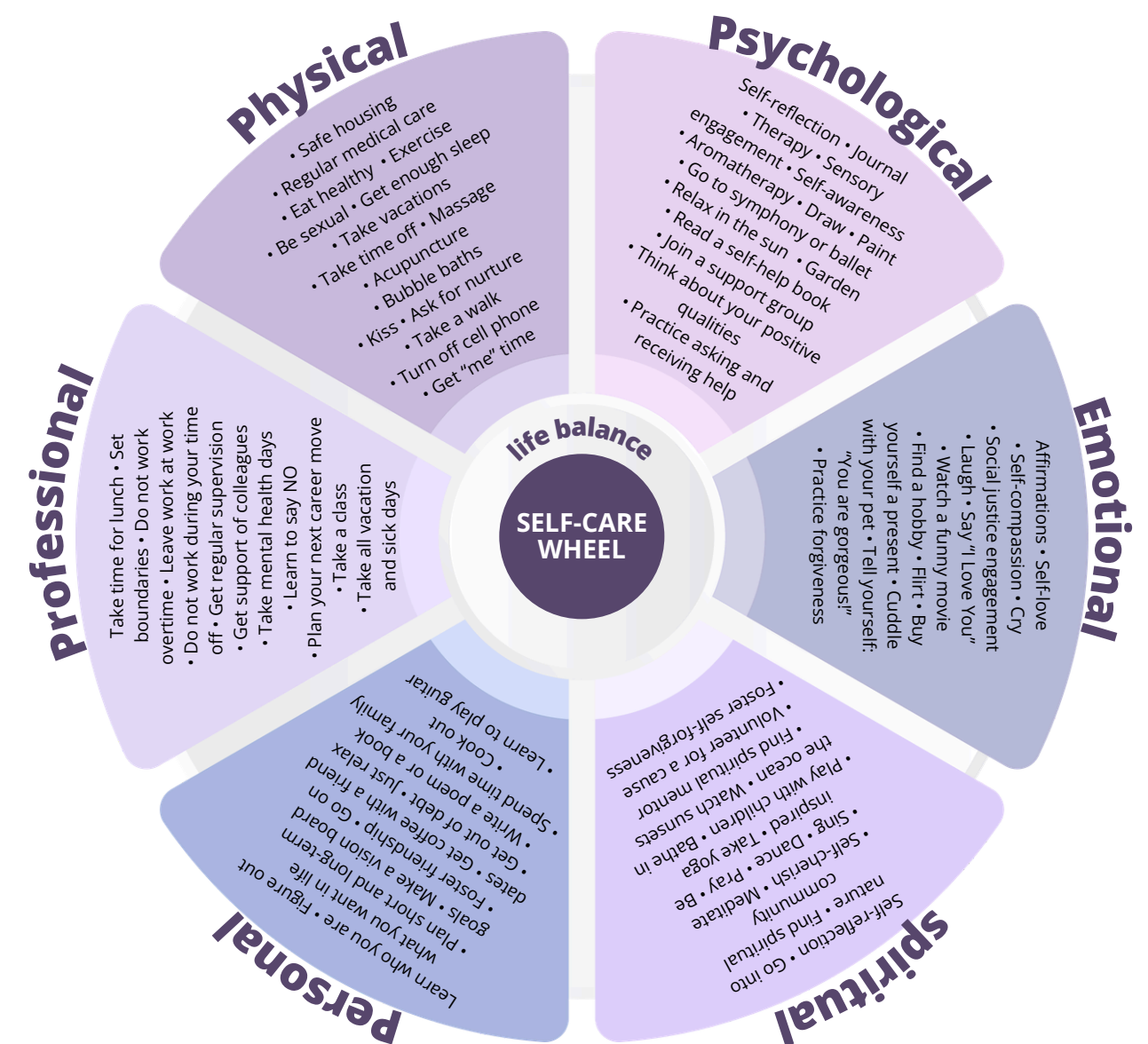
Thank participants for their engagement and invite them to share one feeling, suggestion, or insight from the session.



HANDOUT ONE

TAKING A SELF- HISTORY

SELF-CARE WHEEL



HANDOUT TWO

PREVENTING AND REDUCING STRESS

This handout provides a non-exhaustive list of stress prevention and reduction tools. The strategies are organized across three levels: individual – team/manager – organization. This handout can be used as a source of inspiration for group discussions and exercises focused on identifying ways to prevent and reduce stress in the workplace.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL STRESS PREVENTION AND REDUCTION TOOLS

- Increase self-awareness
- Identify own stress reactions and symptoms
- Understand early warning signs
- Accurately name and articulate what you experience
- Maintain a fulfilling personal life (healthy lifestyle, hobbies, social life, sex, etc.)
- Develop a strong support network (including others understanding trauma work)
- Acknowledge and process your own history of trauma
- Have fun
- Strive for realistic optimism in your work
- Pursue opportunities for spiritual growth
- Remember the importance of your work – you make a difference
- What else?



GROUP / MANAGER LEVEL STRESS PREVENTION AND REDUCTION TOOLS

GROUP (COLLEAGUES)

- Keep an eye out for each other
- Ask how your colleague is doing
- Use / offer collegial debriefing
- Commend each other on your work
- Ask for help if you experience work overload and/or stress
- What else?

MANAGER

- Educate staff on stress
- Normalize and acknowledge stress reactions
- Schedule regular supervision meetings
- Identify help options for staff in need
- Remind staff of the importance of their work
- Make sure expectations, roles and task division are clear and realistic
- What else?

BOTH

- Create and commit to an open and acknowledging culture around stress
- Inform each other of your typical stress reactions
- Develop shared guidelines for how to act if you are worried about a colleague
- Remember breaks during the day
- Team work instead of individual work
- What else?

ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL STRESS PREVENTION AND REDUCTION TOOLS

- Accept stress as real and legitimate – communicate this clearly
- Recognize stress reactions as normal
- Assume responsibility for stress among staff – avoid placing individual responsibility
- Focus on solutions – avoid any type of blaming
- Develop and implement an official stress prevention and reduction policy
- Communicate relevant changes (structural, practical, strategic) clearly and adequately
- Develop and follow a clear organizational strategy – so everyone can see their valuable contribution in the bigger picture
- Regularly commend staff on their important work – so they know they are appreciated
- Provide the best possible physical and psychological work environment
- What else?

INTRODUCTION

Inform participants that this is the 6th and last session. Throughout the previous sessions, they have explored different concepts and practical techniques to support the practice of their own well-being and that of their colleagues.

Explain that this session will introduce additional strategies to help manage stress and reduce the risk of burnout.

Exercise: 4As stress management tool, 30'

Provide participants with 4 scenarios that describe challenging or stressful situations. Ask them to work through each scenario and identify possible ways to manage the stress involved.

Inform the participants that there are 4 main approaches that can be used to cope with stressful situations.

These approaches are known as the 4As: Avoid, Alter, Accept, Adapt.



The strategies **Avoid** and **Alter** focus on changing the situation, while **Accept** and **Adapt** focus on changing our reaction to the situation. For example:

- We use “Avoid” to reduce unnecessary stress and hot-button topics. This may include avoiding situation, topics, or interactions that consistently create tension or emotional strain.
- We use “Alter” to change the situation. This may involve communicating our needs and feelings openly and assertively, setting boundaries or improving time management to work more efficiently and meet deadlines.

- We use “Accept” when the situation cannot be changed. Instead of trying to control what is beyond our control, we focus on managing our emotional response, for example by talking to a trusted person or practicing self-compassion.
- We use “Adapt” by adjusting our expectations or mindset. This may involve looking at the bigger picture, being more flexible or finding new ways to cope with the situation.

01

SCENARIO ONE

Hadi is a new employee in a humanitarian organization. He shares the office with four colleagues. His work is demanding and requires high level of concentration. One of his colleagues is very talkative and frequently starts conversations.

Hadi feels stressed and notices that he is losing time and energy. What could Hadi do to manage his stress? Which of the 4As could he use in this situation?

02

SCENARIO TWO

Sam works in a humanitarian organization that is relocating its office from the capital to the south of the country. Many tasks need to be completed, and the new location is not fully set up. The situation feels unstable, and Sam is feeling stressed and frustrated.

How could Sam manage his stress? Which of the 4As could he use?

03

SCENARIO THREE

Rola has recently been hired by a company in another country. She feels very excited about the new opportunity, but she is also feeling stressed because it is her first time traveling to and living in this country.

How could Rola manage her stress? Which of the 4As could she use?

04

SCENARIO FOUR

Rami was leaving work when he overheard two colleagues discussing a challenging and interesting topic. He would like to join the conversation, but he also needs to leave on time to catch his bus?

Which of the 4As could he use?

Give participant 10 minutes to reach their answers.

Questions for debriefing:

- Was it easy or difficult to apply the 4As when thinking about the scenarios?
- Compare the answers of the participants. Did they all come up with the same solutions?
- Did the participants use one or more strategy, or a combination of strategies, to manage the situations?

NB! Explain to participants that stress is a normal part of life. The goal is not to eliminate stress completely, but to restore balance. This involves identifying the stressors, reducing unnecessary sources of stress when possible, and developing effective coping mechanisms.

Exercise: Action-oriented- stress management, 30'

Introduce the exercise by saying: "Managing stress often involves changing what we can and accepting what we cannot". In this exercise, you will learn how to use a simple problem-solving technique to identify practical ways to manage a stressful situation".

- Ask participants to think of a stressful situation they have experienced recently. It should be a manageable situation, not something highly complex or emotionally overwhelming.
- Ask participant to identify as many possible responses as they can, using the 4 As.
- Then ask them to evaluate each option by considering its advantages and disadvantages.
- Invite participants to select the solution they believe would be the most helpful or realistic for their situation.
- Give participants 10 minutes to complete the activity.

Questions for debriefing:

- Was it easy or difficult to use this structured method to find possible solution?
- Were you able to apply the 4As while they were evaluating your options?
- Are you satisfied with the solution you have selected?

NB! Explain that the chosen solution doesn't need to be perfect. The goal is to identify the most helpful and realistic option for the current situation and circumstance.



Exercise: RAIN Self-compassion, 30'

Introduce the activity by explaining that one of the ways to manage stress is through acceptance.

Does “Accepting” mean giving up? Does it mean tolerating pain without support? How could we relief our stress when we found ourselves in uncontrollable situation? The answer is to practice self-compassion or by befriending yourself. Ask participants to sit comfortably and close their eyes if it feels comfortable. Ask them to follow the instructions:

- 1) To connect with their body, trying to take a deep breath.
- 2) Identify the feeling of stress in their body.
- 3) Investigate the feeling, what does it look? What does it need?
Where in the body it exists?
- 4) put your hand on it or chose any comforting pose. Then, send to it the needed comforting message; love, empowering....
- 5) Sit with this feeling a little bit before returning again to the reality..

Debriefing questions:

1. Ask participants how does it feel after applying the exercise?
2. How this exercise could help them to manage their stress.

Tell participant that this technique is named RAIN. It is the abbreviation of:

Recognize what is going on.

Allow the experience to be there, just as it is.

Investigate with interest and care.

Nurture with self-compassion.

And it is a tool for practicing mindfulness and compassion every time we find ourselves in a stressful situation.

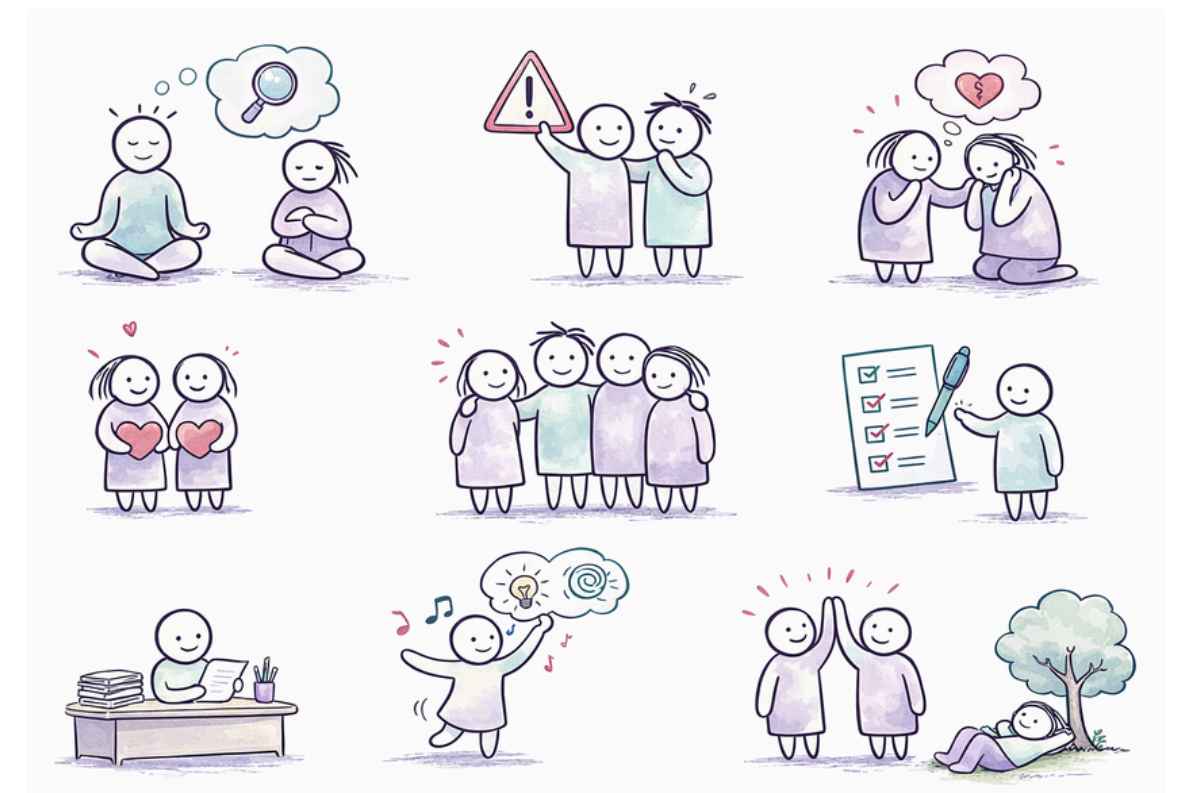
Exercise: My ladder toward knowledge, 20'

Tell participants that now we have reached to the end of our six self- care sessions. We have covered many topics and have practiced many techniques. It is time to summarize what you have taken from these sessions.

Ask participants to draw a ladder where every step refers to a technique or information they have acquired during the 6 sessions. Give participants 10 minutes before they share their ideas. Tell participants that they may not remember all the techniques, but try to remember as much as you can.

To conclude, 10'

Thank participants for their participation and distribute the satisfaction survey.



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- SELF-CARE MANUAL for Frontline Workers, Ministry of Public Health, ABAAD, & Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherland.
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